

## **Bosco Ntaganda behind bars: what does it mean for peace in the DRC?**

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Bosco Ntaganda is finally at the ICC. While the news did necessarily make it onto the first page, his arrest and transfer to the International Criminal Court was all over the newspapers. For those who read the international news on a regular basis, the conflict and humanitarian disaster involving Ntaganda are well known but nonetheless important to recount.

### **The Terminator: Thriving for power and money.**

Ntaganda's youth resembles that of many militiamen in the Great Lakes Region. Growing up in one of the overcrowded Congolese camps during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, he was an angry youth who wanted to survive. Like many, he decided to join a Paul Kagame's militia in order to fight back.

Following the Rwandan genocide, the DRC never found sustainable peace, especially the eastern regions of North and South Kivu where militias and government officials alike exploit the country's natural resources to fill their pocket and fuel conflict. It's a vicious and everlasting cycle that only benefits a few. Ntaganda is one of the rebels who benefited from these resources more than others. He switched sides, fighting against or with national armies, depending what he could get from one or the other affiliation. He grew powerful and rich, owned a luxury hotel, controlled border posts, mines and other resourceful markets. His nickname, "The Terminator", fits him well. In his fight for money and power, he was ruthless. He committed crimes for which the DRC is sadly famous: murder, rape and sexual violence, plunder, and recruitment of child soldiers.

The International Criminal Court first indicted him in 2006, accusing him of war crimes and crimes against humanity. But until today, he had been on the run. "On the run" would be a misconception. Most of the time, everybody knew exactly where he was, including at his hotel in Goma, North Kivu's capital. He threatened or bribed anyone who tried to challenge him. Yet in the end power made him blind to the aspiration of others and he lost his allies. Some of his officers had ambitions too. They learned from him, shifting sides in order to force him to surrender.

### **The M23: a history of violence**

Between 2006 and 2009, Ntaganda was a commander in the CNDP (National Congress for the Defence of the People), a rebel group then headed by Laurent Nkunda. Following the split of the CNDP and Nkunda's arrest in 2009, Ntaganda was rewarded for playing a role in Nkunda's capture by being integrated into the Congolese national army (FARDC), even though he already faced an international arrest warrant. According to a deal between the governments of Rwanda and the DRC, the peace deal between Kinshasa and the CNDP, which included the integration of Ntaganda and 6,000 CNDP combatants into

the FARDC, was important for regional peace and relations between the two countries. But as is often the case in the region, the deal failed as the chain of command intact.

After being re-elected in the controversial 2011 elections and thus in order to redeem his image in the international scene, Congolese president Joseph Kabila announced that he would finally go after Ntaganda. But the general would not go without a fight: in May of last year he created a new rebel movement, the M23 (Mouvement du 23 Mars), and was joined by former CNDP soldiers. The rebels' political, military, and territorial demands were not different from that CNDP's in 2006. Originally, they sought to complete the implementation of the 23 March 2009 agreement signed with the Congolese government. Yet with the growing success of the movement, their political and territorial demands expanded. Despite being a small force, the M23 managed to control large areas of Rutshuru territory, going as far as controlling the main city of Goma. How? Well it is crucial to note that, although Rwanda, denies the allegations, Kigali has been suspected of backing the rebels, providing them with logistical support. Indeed, it would not be surprising that Rwanda and the M23 share the same political interests. Rwanda's security, political and territorial interests in the region are well-known.

### **Increasing pressure**

After several months of conflict, regional and international bodies feared a spill over into neighboring countries and decided to act. Following months of negotiations, the DRC, eleven African countries, the SADC, African Union, and the UN signed the Framework Agreement for the Great Lakes Region on February 24th, under the leadership of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon himself. The agreement provided for the strengthening of the UN mission in the Congo (MONUSCO) through the deployment of a special brigade with a stronger mandate. The aim was to eradicate armed groups active in the region, most importantly the M23.

This agreement and the possibility of a peace deal with Kinshasa seemed to cause a lot of unrest among the rebels: the M23 split into two factions just two days after the signature of the Agreement. Sultani Makenga, the commander in chief of the rebellion, challenged Bosco Ntaganda over the M23's position to the Agreement and Kinshasa. He had certainly learned from Ntaganda's experience with Nkunda. Ntaganda probably grew fearful: in case of a deal, he would never have a chance of being re-integrated into the FARDC.

More intriguing is Rwanda's role in Ntaganda's decision to surrender. It is believed that President Kagame grew increasingly annoyed with accusations made against his government. Rwanda had come under increasing pressure from the international community, which had led several countries to temporarily suspend aid. Thus it appears that Kigali stopped supporting the general and certainly did not want him hiding in Rwanda. After years of serving Rwanda's political, security and economic interests, Ntaganda had become a burden. Handing him to the US embassy and the ICC was perhaps the only option. While we may never really now what role Rwanda played, the fact that the government handed him over certainly plays in its favor.

In the end, Bosco Ntaganda felt pressure from multiple sides. He lost his most powerful military and political allies, and probably even feared for his life. On March 18th he travelled to Kigali, went to the American embassy and turned himself in, requesting to be transferred to The Hague. There is no question that this had been planned with Rwanda and the US, but he must have feared something bigger than the ICC.

## **What now?**

Should we celebrate Ntaganda's arrest after years of impunity? Yes. Should we hope for peace in the DRC? I doubt it. While Ntaganda was powerful, the way he turned himself in shows that there are other militiamen behind him ready to follow his footsteps. I doubt that his arrest and possible trial will deter others. The end of Ntaganda is not the end of the M23. They are still there, just headed by other leaders. With Ntaganda now at the ICC, Makenga has gained a lot of power. As Thierry Vircoulon at the International Crisis Group rightly argues, "it's replacing Bosco Ntaganda with Sultani Makenga, in much the same way as Laurent Nkunda was replaced by Bosco Ntaganda." If the M23 signs a deal with Kinshasa, the rebels will be integrated into the FARDC and it will be a repeat of the CNDP deal signed in 2009. It is an eternal cycle it seems. While Ntaganda's arrest is a victory for impunity, Sultani has committed crimes as well and his integration will be a blow to impunity.

Thus there is no easy answer to peace in the Great Lakes Region because all the actors are defending their own economic and security interests without any concern for the fate of Congolese people. It will take decades for the government to undertake all the economic, political, social, and military reforms on its agenda.